



Commentary: The Legacy of Gen. Mike Ryan

by Brig. Gen. Ron Rand, Director of Public Affairs

September 4, 2001 —Thursday is a big day for our Air Force. At 9 a.m., Gen. Michael E. Ryan, who has been our chief of staff for the past four years, will retire and Gen. John P. Jumper will become our 17th chief of staff. It's an exciting and important moment in our history — the end of one era and the beginning of another. After all the farewells and thanks, General Ryan will depart, and amid all the welcomes and congrats, General Jumper will take the stick. His priorities as our top uniformed officer will be readiness, retention and transformation, and together with Dr. Jim Roche, our secretary, General Jumper will work hard to make sure we remain the world's greatest aerospace force.

In one of his final media interviews, General Ryan was asked what he thought his legacy would be. In typical fashion, he downplayed talk of his own accomplishments, focusing on those of the Air Force team instead. That's the way he is; for him, the Air Force, and Air Force people, come first, in every decision he makes and every action he takes. He leads us from that position, with clear vision for the future, abiding passion for our institution, and unbridled compassion for our people.

When he became chief of staff, General Ryan saw a need to return to our expeditionary roots, and embarked us on the transition to today's expeditionary aerospace force. He knew readiness and retention were our biggest near-term problems, and he set out to correct disturbing downward trends in both. Most importantly, he recognized that our strength is in our people -- that the best equipment in the world is just machinery without bright, dedicated, enthusiastic, patriotic, well-cared-for Americans to operate and maintain it. And he dedicated himself to making us one force, one family -- to taking care of our people.

It's our people he cares about the most -- every single one of them. In every crisis, and in every decision, he makes sure our first action is to take care, both institutionally and personally, of the people affected. His interest extends beyond the active duty force, to the Guard and Reserve, to our civilians and contractors, to our retirees, and -- especially -- to our families. It comes from his unshakable belief in the premise that we're an Air Force family and a family Air Force, and from his unbending commitment to the promise that we take care of our own. For him, it's all about leadership.

General Ryan believes leadership is a team sport, that it should not be personalized, and that good ideas are best when they don't have a single identity ... so his leadership style focuses on group ideas and team accomplishments, rather than on him. He begins meetings with a request that everyone participate, because more input will result in better decisions, and because everyone working together is better and smarter than any one could be. He encourages collaboration and cooperation in all things, and sets the example in his teamwork with our secretary and with our sister services. And he's a great communicator.

The chief recognizes the importance of telling our story -- to our airmen, to the media, to the public, and to Congress -- and he personally tackles the big and tough communication challenges. He also believes leadership is all about communicating, so he restored the chain of command as the primary information source for Air Force people. He has one hard-and-fast rule: when telling our story, our credibility with public and internal audiences depends on openness and honesty -- absolute integrity and truth need to be our watchwords. Nothing more, nothing less. He calls it, "blabbing the truth."

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In the last four years, we've become a much better Air Force, playing a much larger role on the world stage. We've built stability into our expeditionary operations ... arrested readiness ... restored our retirement ... worked retention and recruiting hard to maintain the quality of our force ... increased bonuses ... got pay raises ... fought for our people at every turn ... and so much more. General Ryan would tell you that's what the Air Force leadership team has been up to these past four years. That he would say that is the unique and selfless legacy of this third-generation airman, aviator, leader and patriot who has spent his whole life in the Air Force and who retires Thursday with more than 36 years of active duty service to this great nation of ours -- General Mike Ryan. @